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## **More than mopping floors: The misunderstood nature of Long Day Childcare work**

Long Day Childcare (LDC) services provide prior-to-school education and care for children under five-years-of-age in Australia. Those who work in these services are poorly paid and their efforts undervalued. To support the emotional, social intellectual and physical needs and interests of children, LDC staff are working physically, exercising vigilance in order to fulfil their duty of care, monitoring their interactions with children and regulating their own emotions. [Perhaps] For these reasons, retention of EC educators is significantly lower than other care-based professions. However, little attention has been given to the impact of legislative requirements upon workplace factors beyond pay and conditions that are likely to affect staff retention. This instrumental case study thus investigated workplace factors which personally or professionally affected EC educators' work in their LDC services. The study involves observations and interviews with EC educators ( $n=28$ ) from four South Australian LDC services. Results show that current legislative, structural and operational requirements constrain the ability of participants to collaborate and to enhance the quality of educative care. These concerns were amplified by their LDC service's funding and the difficulty the participants found in achieving a work-life balance. Implications surrounding the way LDC services are perceived and operated in liberal-market economies are discussed.

Emotional work

Socio-political contexts

Long Day Childcare services

Long Day Childcare (LDC) is an increasingly utilized service in Australia with over 801,000 children under the age of five years attending some form of non-parental care in 2006, up 33% in seven years (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' Office of Early Childhood Education, 2008a). As a result an extra 534 LDC services opened in Australia between 2004 and 2006, a growth of 14 per cent in two years. This increase in demand has been accompanied by an increase in the need for people to work in the LDC profession. According to a recent *National Children's Services Workforce Study* Early Childhood (EC) educator numbers are not high enough to sustain this current growth, with a 60% turnover rate per annum in some Australian states and 51% of the remaining educators agreeing that they would 'leave the sector today' if they could (Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, 2006).

International studies have shown the retention rates of EC educators to be lower than most other occupations (Colton & Roberts, 2007; Farrell & Rusbult, 1981; S. Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, & Mauzy, 2007; Rolfe, 2005; M. Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). The demand for LDC services is set to continue, however, for two key reasons. First, an increasing number of women globally are returning to work after having children, potentially seeking the benefits (in addition to pay) that accrue from employment, including career challenges and opportunities, interactions with colleagues, or a reduced dependence on men, for instance (Franzway, 2001; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). Second, women's participation in the labor force increases tax payments and reduces government expenditure on welfare, thus playing a significant part in the stability of Western nation's economies (Martin, 2004; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). An exploratory study into the retention of EC

educators is thus necessary and timely as the demand for EC educators outstrips the LDC profession's 'supply'.

Following a discussion of the literature pertaining to socio-political factors at play within the LDC profession, this paper will consider legislative requirements in Australia. The final part of the paper discusses the ways in which EC educators are influenced by the day-to-day effects of these requirements, before providing implications for policy and practice.

### **What is it about the LDC profession which constrains retention rates?**

In Australia LDC services offer caregiving support and educational opportunities to young children aged 6-weeks to 6 years-of-age and are:

... any place or premises in which more than four (4) young children are, for monetary or other considerations, cared for on a non-residential basis apart from their guardians  
(Government of South Australia, 2007).

The work in these services is a form of emotional labor which typically involves EC educators prioritizing the needs of the children and families in their care above their own through the suppression, elicitation or sustaining of particular emotional expressions. More specifically, it involves '... the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and body display' that fosters secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships in an ongoing, equitable way (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Hochschild, 1983).

Feelings of trust, attachment, belonging and security are common 'states of mind' which early years literature promotes as vital to the educator-child-parent relationship (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2005b; Dolby, 2007;

Laevers, 2006; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Sims, Guilfoyle, & Parry, 2005). Yet the investment of emotion is typically viewed as a more feminine, low-skilled type of work than more overtly physical or intellectual professions, as the forming and maintenance of social relations has been linked to women's biological drives and their traditional child-rearing responsibilities (Erickson, 2004; Hochschild, 1983; Manning-Morton, 2006). The normative expectation of young children being cared for by their mothers thus remains (Mooney, 2003; P. Moss, 2003) despite contemporary boundaries between informal, home-care and more formal LDC services beginning to blur (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007; Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2005a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006).

The management of emotion in care work has certainly received significant attention and been shown to have alienating effects on staff (Erickson, 2004; Lewis, 2010), yet we know little about how such boundary or policy changes affect care work like that performed in LDC services, or why some staff actually gain pleasure from their emotional labor. We do know that LDC workforce studies have identified being employed in positive workplaces as a valuable part of the work lives of EC educators (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2004; S. Gable & Halliburton, 2003; Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook, 1991). For instance, ongoing interactions and discussion amongst colleagues that led to the easy exchange of work tasks has been found to support their retention (Lyons, 1997; Strober, Gerlach-Downie, & Yeager, 1995). Similarly, strategies such as mentoring programs and involvement in choosing team members have been found to support positive interactions between colleagues in LDC services (Blyth, 2003). Such interactions were fostered by EC educators who were familiar with their roles and who had the individual freedom to follow some of their own work interests (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Doherty, Friendly, & Forer, 2002).

However, EC educators' altruism and sacrifices to continue their work are so prevalent in the female-dominated profession that it is suggested that they subjugate their own needs within the workplace (Sumsion, 2005), believing that they are better biologically equipped and socially capable of caring for young children compared with their male colleagues (Murray, 2000). The continual suppression of their own needs has led to EC educators' reporting feelings of stress and burnout and to their eventual turnover (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Goelman & Guo, 1998; Manlove & Guzella, 1997; Noble & Macfarlane, 2005; Vaka, 2006). This is perhaps best illustrated by the industrial stance EC educators have recently taken.

EC educators have taken little action to improve caregiver-to-child ratios or their own wages and work conditions when they know it is parents and families who ultimately pay for these changes through increased service fees (National Association of Community Based Children's Services (NACBCS), 2006). Yet, in South Australia, EC educators continued to be paid an average of \$774.37 per week (before tax), compared to Australian workers' average weekly earnings of \$1 098.70 in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2006; Fair Work Australia, 2006), and typically worked under poor staff-to-child ratios (e.g. one EC educator to 10 children over two-years-of-age) and with large group sizes (Early Childhood Development Sub-group of the Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008; Jackson, 1996). Recognizing this, the Australian Liquor, Hospitality & Miscellaneous Workers Union's recent *Big Steps in Childcare* campaign focused on working with Australian governments on workforce reform (Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous workers Union (LHMU), 2008). Initiatives which rely on the action of EC educators, however, fail to recognize that the profession does not currently have a clear professional identity that would enable them to challenge the top-down political structures and legislative requirements that continue the cycle of educator self-sacrifice and burnout (Osgood, 2006).

As professional identities are socially-constructed, one way of improving working conditions and staff retention may be for EC educators themselves to more clearly articulate the value and complexities of their work to families, communities and policymakers alike (Mastracci, Newman, & Guy, 2006). Professional identity literature calls on EC educators to more explicitly align the intent of their work to education as LDC work involves many of the same programming and relational responsibilities as their primary school colleagues (Ackerman, 2006; Fenech et al., 2004; Goodfellow, 2001; Meade, 2006; Saffron, 1988). A word of caution is necessary here, as too strong an emphasis on education may lead to better qualified and more highly paid teachers being associated with the decidedly feminized conception of LDC work (Sumsion, 2005). Thus EC educators need to consider how they publicize the nature of their work to create a viable alternative version of the LDC profession which is seen as 'critically reflexive', 'boundary crossing' and 'proudly distinct' within the community (Manning-Morton, 2006; Osgood, 2006).

The challenge of creating an alternative perception of LDC work rests in the nature of this form of emotional labor, as EC educators get caught up in completing an array of day-to-day tasks which are made onerous by their demanding work conditions and the dynamism of meeting others' needs (Rush, 2006). These 'invisible workings' leave much of the EC educators' daily work to be taken for granted both by policymakers and communities outside of the LDC service and by the families, children and staff within them. Research suggests that such care work is invisible because it is seen as closely resembling the work traditionally performed by women in the home and is, therefore, of little interest to legislative systems and policymakers (Kosny & MacEachen, 2009). EC educators have consequently reported that they have insufficient influence on the decision-making affecting their daily work practices

(Lyons, 1997; Strober et al., 1995; Wolf & Walsh, 1998), and with little input into their LDC services, believe that their current work conditions do not prioritize quality provisions (Carson, Maher, & King, 2007; Fenech, Sumsion, Robertson, & Goodfellow, 2008). So until the complexities of LDC work are better understood and recognized by those outside of the profession, it is likely that high rates of staff turnover will continue.

### **How does the socio-political climate also constrain LDC retention rates?**

Australia's LDC services operate within a liberal market economy, '... in which private market arrangements take care of many social welfare needs' (Morgan, 2005). So, like the United States of America and the United Kingdom, Australia provides fee-based subsidies for families to lower their regular LDC costs as well as annual income tax reductions on a sliding welfare scale (Purcal & Fisher, 2006; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). The fee subsidies from the Child Care Benefit are paid directly to LDC services on behalf of families while the tax relief is paid to families through their income-benefits tax. In this way non-government organizations (NGOs), like LDC services, rely upon social welfare with market forces left to shape their delivery and focus in liberal market economies (Baulderstone, 2007; Sumsion, 2006).

Broadly, two NGO types operate in Australia: not-for-profit, community-based; and for-profit, private or corporately owned LDC services. The split between these two service types is based on their size, intent and subsequent legal requirements (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2008b; Government of South Australia, 1998; National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2008b; Our Community Pty Ltd, 2001). Community-based services do not operate to make a profit beyond that which is needed to be self-sustaining and are governed by a body



of nominated family and community members involved at the site (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006; Press & Woodrow, 2009). Conversely, private or corporate services operate to make a profit for the owners and/or shareholders and are typically managed by a corporate childcare body associated with the site. Australia currently has the highest number of corporate LDC services in the world, with for-profit providers now offering roughly 70% of the 4830 LDC services operating across the country (Brennan, 2008b; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' Office of Early Childhood Education, 2008b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006; Press & Woodrow, 2009). Privatization makes it challenging to establish a viable future trajectory for the retention of EC educators in LDC services. When profit-making is at the heart of a LDC service's operations, money-making must be prioritized ahead of the needs of workers, to appease owners and shareholders and ensure the service's continued financial support (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008).

Yet the provision of out-of-home care services through private enterprise continues in liberal market economies like Australia because the normative expectation is that young children should be in the care of their mothers where they can be individually nurtured (Blau, 1999; Brennan, 2008b; Graham, 1983; Macrae & Phillips, 2006; Nelson, 1999; Totaro, 2006). As a result it is unnecessary for governments in such economies to contribute to the capital or operational costs of LDC services (Purcal & Fisher, 2006), as any childcare provided out of the home is seen as substitute mothering and can be provided by 'the market' with little government outlay (Cameron, Mooney, & Moss, 2002). LDC services are thus viewed as a short-term welfare option for an increasing number of women who are in paid employment (P. Moss, 2003; P. Moss, 1995). With an increasing demand for LDC services, Australia

has seen the proliferation of for-profit provisions despite not-for- and for-profit LDC fees being equally subsidized for families. The power that each type of LDC service has socially and politically is far less balanced in this country (Power, 2007).

Socially and politically LDC work in Australia is typically undervalued, and subsequently attracts lower EC educator wages than those in Nordic countries (Morgan, 2005). Lower staff wages, and for-profits' greater economies-of-scale, have enabled them to out-price their competitors and grow to dominate the market-driven provisions of LDC in this country. Consequently, for-profit LDC services have proliferated and grown in influence, profiting from the low staff wages that make up the bulk of their fees. Profit-making from LDC services is further sustained by the feminine connotations of the work, as the care sold in private or 'liberal' markets is bought by mother 'consumers' and provided by EC educators who put their clients' needs ahead of their own in their work (Ackerman, 2006; Baulderstone, 2007; P. Moss, 2003; Nelson, 1999).

For-profit services argue, however, that the privatization of LDC has supported a significant investment into infrastructure and resources for care provisions which would not have otherwise been available in this country (Ball, 1997; Neugebauer, 2008). Further, the exchange of money for childcare does not necessarily diminish the caring feelings of EC educators in LDC services. But the larger economies of scale that for-profit providers have gives them an edge over their not-for-profit counterparts, with centralized booking, purchasing, professional development and marketing opportunities boosting their profits and their 'market share' within the LDC profession (Brennan, 2008a; Hills, 2006; Press & Woodrow, 2009). So with fee-subsidies for families instead of direct, government-based operational funding, not-

for-profit LDC services must compete with for-profit providers, who have a competitive 'edge' in the market (Ackerman, 2006).

Together, this literature suggest that the LDC workplace may be the site at which sector complexities and issues are amplified or cushioned for EC educators.

However, current workforce studies give little indication of the extent to which these factors have affected EC educators' continuing LDC work endeavours.

### **The research study**

This paper draws on an instrumental case study conducted with four LDC services and 28 of their EC educators (*n= 26 women; 2 men*) in the Adelaide-metropolitan region of South Australia. Instrumental case studies focus on the issue under inquiry as the case (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 1994). This study's case was the issue of EC educator retention in LDC services, as retention rates are 68-percent per annum in Australia and up to 40-percent in South Australia (Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, 2006). It was designed to explore the nature of the LDC workplace as a service and the individual EC educator's role in the formation and sustenance of their own employment intentions. The intent was to gain a richer insight into the factors which had impacted on the work and retention of these staff in view of the socio-political context.

The four LDC services involved in this study were approached to participate for two key reasons. First, their EC educator retention rates were higher than the South Australian average of 40-percent (see above), offering potential insights into the workplace factors these LDC services offered that enabled them to retain their staff. Second, their varying number of places for children, staff team sizes and NGO types offered sufficient LDC service diversity to investigate this issue of retention in some

depth. Two of the LDC services were of average size, with 50-70 places available daily for children: one was for-profit and one was a not-for-profit type (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2008a). Of the other two participating services, one was a large, 100-place for-profit service and the other a small, 25-place not-for-profit service. Together these sites offered sufficient diversity and variety of LDC workplaces for a small but informative study. EC educators from each of the four LDC services were invited to participate; their voluntary interest in participating was the only criterion for their involvement in this study. Further, though the participants ranged in age, cultural origin and educational attainment, the majority were typical of the LDC profession in South Australia being female, either diploma-trained or unqualified, under 30 years or between 40-50 years of age, with about three years part-time experience at the service (Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, 2006). Further information on the participating LDC services and EC educators is provided in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.

Data was generated from semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the staff regarding their work within the LDC service. The interviews followed from document analyses of service policies and over 70 hours of participant observations of staff work practices. The research employed a naturalistic inquiry approach, which attempts to understand phenomena under inquiry by studying individual's responses within the particular social locations where the phenomena occurs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study sought to form working hypotheses about the nature of staff retention from within the LDC service and given the socio-political contexts at the time by understanding how individual EC educators felt their LDC workplaces had influenced their work and employment intentions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rogoff, 2003). The central concern was to grasp the EC educators' participation in and contributions to the LDC service factors that shaped their employment intentions

(Rogoff, 2003). Such an approach recognized that their retention developed within complex, dynamic work-life contexts that were best understood within the intricacies and diversities of the 'real-world' (Thelen & Smith, 1998). Document analyses and observational data were entered into an NVivo database and analyzed immediately after their collection, as were the transcribed staff interviews.

Following the work of Richards, analyses were processed descriptively before the data were more systematically coded using a cross-sectional approach to compare emerging LDC work concepts between services and educators (Richards, 2006). The evolution of these concepts emerged from the close nexus between the research questions and data which were explored for common accounts and patterns of influence in light of staff employment intentions. Focusing on the EC educators' behaviors, opinions, concerns, interactions and practices, this naturalistic approach enabled an accurate reconstruction of LDC service factors influencing employment intentions. In considering both the cultural-institutional processes which shaped work at a LDC service, as well as the experience of EC educators who are a part of it, these two lines of inquiry gave an insight into the '... personal, interpersonal, and cultural aspects of [retention] conceived as different analytic views of ongoing, mutually constituted processes' (Rogoff, 2003).

### **Working conditions: A union focus on improvements for the profession**

In an attempt to move the profession's identity or standing beyond 'caregiving' alone, the Liquor, Hospitality & Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) has put increasing pressure on LDC services, the government, and the Industrial Relations Commission to improve staff wages, work conditions and career structures (Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous workers Union (LHMU), 2003; Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous workers Union (LHMU), 2008; Plibersek, 2005). Certainly literature suggests that

these staff are looking for increased wages (S. Gable et al., 2007; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Phillips et al., 1991; M. Whitebook & Sakai, 2003), and better opportunities for promotion and career advancement (Blyth, 2003; Burdon, 2000; S. Gable & Hunting, 2001; Lambert & Paoline III, 2008; P. Moss, 1995; Murray, 2000; Stremmel, 1991/6). While almost half the staff participating in this study indicated that they would appreciate better pay, the other workplace concerns they raised suggested that there is more to retention than fixing the '...poor career prospects [that] have created a serious skills crisis in Australia's early childhood workforce' (Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous workers Union (LHMU), 2008).

Remarkably seven of the 28 staff in this study had recently received promotions and in each instance this was because a number of their colleagues had left the workplace. Ironically, greater rates of turnover provide greater opportunities for promotion. Team-leader roles were particularly sought after in the four LDC services:

I would like to step up and be a team-leader. I don't know whether I will be able to do it, at my Centre, so you know, I would be prepared to not be a team-leader and work there ...  
So I don't, maybe in a year's time, you know, things might have happened by then, it might be, you know, but I don't see that happening.

Yet the staff who had won promotions described how simply they had gained them:

... the team-leader left and they were looking for a team-leader role, so I actually put my hand up for that and so I got that provided I was going to finish my qualifications.

Therefore, it is misguided to assume that EC educator retention rates could be increased simply by improving career hierarchies to create opportunities for promotion when such opportunities already exist as a result of staff turnover.

Symptomatic of an unstable workforce in the LDC sector, discussions with staff in this study suggest that EC educators are instead looking to '... be out there doing

something else, you know, I'm not going to keep mopping floors.' In this study nine staff were looking for change and a further nine were looking for new challenges in their work, indicating that, rather than simply looking for promotion, EC educators are seeking greater scope in their LDC work. For instance, one participant looking for change noted that:

Well, I think variety counts for a lot because when you get a bit of sick of something you should be allowed to change it a bit within the centre or just with different hours or different rooms ... It may not work for everybody, but for me I need variety or I get, sort of, tired and ho-hum.

Similarly a staff member looking for new challenges in their work explained:

... I have enjoyed the challenge of the new things that I've had to encounter. I've enjoyed the challenges of the logistical nightmares of painting, which still haven't gone, but it's just, I have enjoyed, you know, what I've done. But I am looking forward to going back onto the floor with the children ... Challenges, I mean I'd like to do a couple of training courses next year. Basically I think maybe on different sorts of activities to get the mind back into thinking in the role ...

The sixteen others looking for change or challenges also wanted to gain 'something more' from their work with young children. So while literature has called on those in the LDC profession to re-conceptualize the work of EC educators (Fleet, 2002; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Murray, 2000; Sumsion, 2002; Wolf & Walsh, 1998), the staff in this study clearly valued more depth and scope to the dimensions of their work, given the right circumstances or potential opportunities to do so. Therein lay the problem: staff had little time to do more in their LDC work than the day-to-day on-floor and administrative tasks that were required of them.

## **Professionalism: Top-down government initiatives for retention**

Research studies on EC educator retention (Berk, 1985; Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Cameron et al., 2002; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Russell, 1997; Strober et al., 1995), and two recent Australian Federal Government inquiries advocate for improved training and professional development opportunities for EC educators to curb current high turnover rates (Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), 2003; Labour Economics Office South Australia, 2008). Notions of in-service improvement and increases in staff qualifications are certainly neither new nor unfamiliar proposals for retaining staff within the LDC profession. Key literature has noted, for instance, that EC educators who are interested in educational attainment and opportunities for professional development typically indicate their intent to stay in LDC services or the profession (Berk, 1985; S. Gable & Halliburton, 2003; Howes, 1997; Phillips et al., 1991; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008; Vaka, 2006; Warrilow & Fisher, 2003).

Staff in this study similarly suggested that their training and professional development opportunities were of key interest to them in their continued employment. Eight of the 28 staff were training for their qualifications at the time and another five intended to study in the near future. These staff were interested in becoming more involved in their LDC services and, as one participant put it, '... because I've had no training. I find that a bit hard sometimes.' This lack of formalised knowledge was also identified by a quarter of the qualified staff who explained that:

I think if people are trained they get more of an idea about, you know, they obviously understand everything better and so they put a little bit more thought into things.

Indicating the potential value of government-supported training schemes as a carrot for 'unqualifieds' to complete their training, five staff at one of the for-profit centers reasoned instead that they commenced studying because it was good for their



careers and required no out-of-pocket expenses. Perhaps most importantly, however:

... there's about three or four of us doing it through our Centre and I got to do the diploma which is great. Yep. ... We've been able to, 'cause, especially because you know, there's [others] doing it as well in my room, it's so good to be able to sit back and go hey how [are] you finding this, and you know, being able to talk to the other qualifieds and stuff and it's really, really good. We've had heaps of support.

So rather than seeking only to support their on-floor work with young children, incentives for training were also attractive because of the relative ease with which untrained staff could study on the job. Either way LDC staff in this study showed a clear interest in training even if it was simply advantageous for them to take up a government-offered scholarship.

The carrot of training opportunities for unqualified EC educators to complete their qualifications did not work in the same way for over half of the staff in this study when professional development sessions were compulsory. Service policies typically stated, for instance, that:

Our staff are required to participate in professional development training in order to broaden their knowledge and upgrade their skills.

In theory these sentiments had the intent of conveying to parents and community members that being a part of the LDC profession meant engaging in continuous learning. But such top-down directives led to staff discussing their compulsory sessions as workshops that are in 'a folder sitting in the staff room' and something that management 'encourages you to do at least twice in a year'. When six staff in this study thought that they drove their professional development opportunities from the bottom-up, however, they explained that they engaged in learning which

increased their knowledge and upgraded their skills. As one qualified participant detailed:

Yeah, I've done 'Listening to children' workshops and I first did an introductory course last year and I went to it on a Thursday. That was a course that I paid for myself and I went on my days off and on the first day I went to the course and I thought this was the biggest load of rubbish anywhere, this was just garbage, there was just no way this could possibly work, you know, rewarding positive behavior and all that sort of thing. And I went back into the room and that very next day I was able to use it and I was so amazed by the results, I thought 'Oh God, this is fantastic' and I have been using it since. And so for six months I have been using these techniques that I've learnt slowly over a period of months, and now (team leader) is using them as well, and so that's quite good to get that support off him where he can see I am sitting with a child who is really upset, he gives me that time until the child is feeling better. And now I do the same for him.

Not only did such learning support these individual staff to avoid feelings of stagnation in their work, it also enabled them to improve their work with young children on-floor. As such, a focus on training for qualifications or professional development should be about more than conveying the hallmarks of a learned profession (M. Whitebook, 1999). Such learning should support staff to reflect on current work practices and encourage them to work more thoughtfully and wisely as a result.

In support of this notion, Australian literature suggests that there is more to being a professional than the attainment of qualifications and the pursuit of continuous learning. Goodfellow (2003) advises, for instance, that EC educators engage in wise practice or practical wisdom as '...a way of knowing that involves expert knowledge (including personal/professional, theoretical, and practical knowledge) and sound judgment' to think about how practices are affective, experiential and reasoned. Sumsion (2006) similarly calls on EC educators to reflect on work practices to collaboratively re-position the profession through a critique of their beliefs and values

and consideration of the socio-political influences upon LDC work. But short, content-focused professional development training sessions do not typically support EC educators to develop the self-knowledge and relationship skills necessary for such reflective or wise practice (Lifton, 2001; Manning-Morton, 2006). In an important sense, professional development should be as much about processes of reflection and collaboration as it is about the imparting of theoretical or practical ideas regarding 'best practice' in educative care environs.

Staff in the current study stated that they valued having process-focused professional development opportunities. In particular five staff explained that it enabled them to consider the practices of others by 'networking' or liaising collaboratively around areas of similar interest:

... being in a Centre five days a week you don't (pause) there's nothing outside your world  
... so going to a training centre, it gives you that life again. I love it!

Yet, the reality of having opportunities for such collaborations within, let alone across LDC workplaces, was rare according to the participants in this study. When such opportunities had arisen, any sense of inspired creativity or ingenuity which might have been gained from liaising with other LDC services or colleagues was lost when their leaders or management groups failed to see its value for innovative practice. For example, after completing a placement in another early years setting as part of her university training, one participant explained:

I approached Management and asked them would they be interested in implementing that [learning stories] within the Centre? And I got a lukewarm response ... I was told yes, I could do it, if I wanted to, but they would be changing all of the way that we programmed using the formulate[d] procedure which will be set down by the [new] company owners ...

The policy manuals of the four LDC services described the nature of professional collaboration quite differently. For example, one policy manual indicated that staff

were required '... to seek and consider the views of colleagues in the Early Childhood profession' and to '... share their ideas in a positive manner, fostering greater networks and relationships within the field.' Professional collaborations between staff appeared to be merely written sentiments which did not lead into practices that encouraged EC educators to support and inspire each other. Thus the potential that collegial collaboration could have for igniting professional passion and staff retention was potentially diminished rather than enhanced.

### **Licensing & accreditation requirements: Public accountability & assurance**

The value society places upon young children and the EC educators who work with them is also shaped by external regulation and legislative requirements within particular socio-political contexts (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Mooney, 2003; P. Moss, 2003). At the time of the study, LDC services had to comply with a number of state and federal requirements in order to continue operating. South Australian LDC services were required to meet licensing standards assessed by representatives from the *Childcare Licensing and Standards Unit* of the Department of Education and Children's Services (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2008b). Service leaders and staff had to maintain documentation on their policies, enrolments, programming, and hours of work, as well as keeping occupational health and safety records to verify compliance with licensure terms (Government of South Australia, 1998).

At a national level all LDC services were required to register with the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) in order for enrolled families to receive regular Child Care Benefit (CCB) payments (National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2008a). Fee-relief for families was only provided if the LDC service was fully-accredited or in the process of working towards accreditation. To be accredited,

services needed to attain satisfactory, good, or high quality ratings on 33 guiding principles outlined under seven quality areas within the *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System's Quality Practices Guide* every two-and-half years (National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2005).

Though the primary concern of legislative requirements is to ensure LDC services provide young children with '... stimulating, positive experiences and interactions that nurture all aspects of their development' (National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2008a), its application to the profession has had other effects on staff. On-floor or 'coal-face' descriptions from eight staff in this study highlight, for instance, the effect increasing group sizes had upon their work. As one participant detailed:

The number just seems to be creeping up and up and up. They didn't used to be as many as that in one room, I don't think. So now that's, like, in the toddler room I think it's up to 21 in the morning, and it's just so full-on and sometimes at the rest time there is not enough area for them to have a decent sleep, because there is always other children out in the main area because there is no room. And that causes a problem because there are certain ones that are very challenging, who won't sleep. It's just - it distracts the other children, and then they won't sleep, and then it is like 'Oh, God!' (Laughs)

Further, 15 of the 28 staff interviewed detailed how their work had been influenced by their service's staff-to-child ratio, which has long been recognized as being too high for quality educative care provision (Goossens & van Ijzendoorn, 1990; National Association for Regulatory Administration & National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Rush, 2006). As one of many qualified staff members stated:

... [it is] a problem for all centers. I think a one-to-five ratio for babies is just ridiculous. Whoever made that has never been in a room with that many babies! (Laughs)

For these staff it is not simply that they are responsible for a high number of very young children, but that working with a ratio of 1:5 for children under 2 and 1:10 for children over 2 years-of-age is unfeasible. The division of staff attention between such large groups of children is said to be particularly challenging, for example:

... that's a real issue, how can you have (pause) I mean staff do really well, or the best they can but just to be with five children and try and meet all their needs and to give them a really good day, that would be really hard and I don't know how people can do that ... because it just takes one child to be upset and everyone else has to wait or miss out ...

This was especially true if children in the group were of a similar age or '...if nobody came to ask if I wanted help until half past 9; I had 18 children on my own' as another participant explained. The immediacy of the work and high child: adult ratios left staff with little time to liaise with one another, to reflect on their practice or to learn within their LDC service about how to improve the educational opportunities they offer the young children in their care. Instead, twenty-four on-floor staff focused their attention towards on-floor tasks, which mostly supported the routine needs of the children in their care.

Since the conduct of this study, however, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has agreed to reduce staff-to-child ratios to 1:4 for children under 2 by 2012 as well as 1:5 for children 2-3 and to 1:11 for children 3-5 years-of-age by 2016 (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009b). Further, the agreement will see the introduction of a new National Quality Standards framework. The framework will include preschools and other early years programs not currently assessed for quality and is intended to reduce the 'doubling up' of checks from previous state licensing and national accreditation assessments.

The COAG *Agreement for Early Childhood Reform* will go some way to addressing staff concerns about providing quality care and education for children. It must be

noted, however, that changing quality assurance mechanisms will not resolve the lack of time nine staff reported they have to actually comply with such requirements, including accreditation documentation and compliance with the recording of attendance and occupational, health and safety regulations. For instance, one qualified participant noted that:

I'd really like it if we have more programming time at the moment as my team-leader gets two hours a week and I get one and that (pause) I find that that is nowhere near enough time to do anything in an hour. What I started doing is programming at home, at night, cos I take reams and reams of observations, and then during my one-hour programming and quite often my lunch breaks as well I write Learning Stories.

To cope, these participants said they typically worked at home, at night, in their lunch breaks or before they started their shifts to complete these administrative tasks, often to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing:

I've been on the floor a year and a half and I'm already getting the feeling I never thought I would get, that I'd watched the other girls get. I don't like those feelings ... I love where I am, I love working with the kids. I love being there with parents. I really enjoy that, I don't want to leave that and I want to be here for a lot more years. I need the balance, I need a day off. I need to be able to, I'm a person who likes to do arts and crafts as well, and I don't think I've touched anything for 12 months. If I don't have that, then I've only got this and I think with childcare you can put in 70 hours a week and you will still have something to do with your room or whatever. It's not something that ever ends so I have drawn a line within myself ... I don't mind putting my lunch hours into things, I don't mind even staying back half an hour at the end of the day, but I don't bring it home anymore ...

In effect, the quality assurance measures put in place for young children actually detract from the ability of staff to provide optimal educative care experiences. In turn, this threatens the ability of their LDC service to provide continuity of care for children as these workplaces fight to retain staff developing symptoms of stress and burnout.

Complex decision-making that leads to sound professional judgement and action is at the heart of 'good' practice. However, the external auditing of EC educators' practice using 'tick-boxes' diminishes them as practitioners (Fish & de Cossart, 2006). Ideally, EC educators should be seen as consummate professionals who are recognized for the skills and knowledge they bring to the complexities of educative care work with young children (Cameron et al., 2002; Fenech et al., 2004; P. Moss, 2003; Rolfe, 2005). As such there is a need to move away from the continual auditing of key competencies for accountability, and to move towards a model of quality assurance that focuses on staff engaging in reflective practice and critical inquiry (Maloney & Barblett, 2002; Power, 2007). This would see a dramatic reduction in the administrative work of EC educators who, according to participants in this study, already 'seek and consider the views of colleagues', 'share their ideas in a positive manner', and attempt to 'foster greater networks and relationships within the field', factors which are recognized as the hallmarks of professional conduct for those working with young children (Early Childhood Australia (ECA), 2007).

### **For- & not-for-profit services: Funding issues for non-government organizations**

Regardless of whether LDC services were owned and operated to procure profit for share-holders or were run only to benefit those enrolled, both service types were run and funded as non-government organizations (NGOs). Such organizations have a complex relationship with governments in liberal market economies because NGOs deliver community and social services on government's behalf, are minimally funded (through fee subsidies) and regulated, and can actively oppose government policies in the pursuit of policy change (Baulderstone, 2007; Brennan, 2008a; Kosny & MacEachen, 2009; Morgan, 2005; Power, 2007; Purcal & Fisher, 2006; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008). As a result,



NGOs face considerable challenges in continuing to operate. Labor costs constitute over 70% of expenditure in NGOs while staff in such workplaces typically manage high workloads for wages 10-25% less than government award rates for similar positions (Carson et al., 2007).

In the current study staff did not make a distinction between the way that their LDC workplaces operated or were funded when discussing factors which constrained their work. Staff faced three specific workplace issues that directly result from insufficient service funding. First, 10 staff in this study were concerned about not having basic supplies like food and nappies on-hand on a consistent basis as well as experiencing:

... the lack of resources as well ... You know we could be doing so much, but we don't have the equipment or we don't have something, it's just something that would enable us to do all these things.

Second, as each LDC service had tried to minimize spending, and with labor costs being one of the biggest outlays in NGOs, five staff reported that work was constrained by:

... dare I say it, management, like we had no cleaners before and we've just like got them in. Cleaning was a big frustration to a lot of the staff, especially me because working in the toddler room we have two staff in the afternoon and I'm trying to clean this while, you know, one person's outside with the children and I'm doing nappies and rah, rah, rah and that was really, really awful.

But perhaps most importantly, eight staff in this study noted that because they were trying to 'do more' with 'less support' they simply did not have time to spend with the children:

... cos the day seems to go so quickly, and you know, you're getting lunch ready and filling out forms, you know, changing nappies and stuff so I don't have a lot of time to sit with the children and I think (pause) if we had time for those routine things, you know,

filling up the bottles in the morning and stuff – if we had extra time to be able to do that, then that would be a help.

Another 12 staff noted the wearying demands of routine administrative or cleaning tasks, and a staggering 23 of the 28 staff commented that they did not have enough time in which to adequately carry out their educative care work.

Current government funding for LDC services is clearly worthy of further attention because fee-based subsidies for families directly affect the quality of the education and care young children are able to receive (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2005; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre, 2008).

Not only have the LDC staff in this study indicated that they are struggling to provide the conditions for quality but, with these factors contributing to their intentions to leave, staff turnover could further cost services through the advertising, hiring and training of replacement EC educators.

### **Research on LDC workplace factors which may add to wider turnover**

Turnover research indicates that high workloads are linked to the retirement or movement of EC educators into other employment sectors (Carson et al., 2007; Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2005a), and that EC educators seek out positions or sites where small group sizes and lower ratios of staff-to-children enable them to teach more effectively and support positive developmental outcomes for young children (Bretherton, 2010; Early Childhood Development Sub-group of the Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008; Howes, 1997). This study suggests that EC educators' retention may also be affected by their

thirst for new challenges and greater variety in their LDC work that the sector or their services may not currently be providing.

Previous turnover research has also reported that EC educators' employment conditions can leave them feeling either supported or confronted by their continuing LDC work efforts (Lyons, 1997; Mullis, Cornille, Mullis, & Taliano, 2003; Phillips et al., 1991). Findings from this study show that EC educators saw limited funding in their LDC services as a lack of support from their management, regardless of its for- or not-for-profit status. Staff were reportedly short of resources and colleagues on-floor which became a prime concern, especially when EC educators are said to want a workplace culture which focuses on the needs of the young children and families in their care (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2005a; Murray, 2000). This is perhaps why participants also identified poor staff-to-child ratios, group-sizes and insufficient time for planning and preparation as affecting their LDC work efforts. These factors suggest that conditions in the LDC workplace may have a significant role to play in EC educators' continued employment.

However, Australian and international workforce research typically identifies poor pay rates as the primary reason that EC educators leave their LDC services (Burdon, 2000; Cameron et al., 2002; S. Gable & Hunting, 2001; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Strober et al., 1995; M. Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998b; Whitehead, 1997). As a result, cash incentives for educational attainment or work merits have been found to reduce the turnover of EC educators from LDC services (S. Gable et al., 2007; Howes, 1997; Krueger, 2005; M. Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998a; M. Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). EC educators from this study were no different, indicating that they would value higher rates of pay. But they also wanted their LDC services to invest in professional development and training opportunities that would enable them to follow

their own work interests and to collaborate with colleagues in and across LDC services. So, perhaps most importantly, findings from this study suggest that the retention of EC educators is less about how much they are paid, and more about how their professional endeavors and interests are valued in LDC services and the sector more broadly.

### **Implications for the retention of EC educators in LDC services**

With respect to staff retention, the findings from this study issue the profession with a word of caution: continuing employment of EC educators cannot be achieved without due consideration of social and political influences. Externally-driven issues facing staff in their LDC work go beyond the limits of their workplace's structure, funding, audited compliance or operational foci. As such:

- LDC services and staff need to demonstrate the extent of their qualifications and professional development training through their involvement in reflective, collaborative practices intended to improve work with young children and families. In Australia, governments and communities need to move beyond the drive to improve the qualification levels of newly recruited and current EC educators and give them opportunities to extend their creativity, ingenuity and best practice (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009a).
- Service leaders and policymakers need to consider how to move beyond regulatory controls in ways that show trust in the professional caliber of EC educators. At present, EC educators' autonomy to make 'wise practice' decisions is not a feature of the audit-based practices of current legislative and operational LDC service requirements in liberal market economies like Australia, the USA or the UK. Generally, service-based decisions about workplace operations should be made within LDC services, in collaboration with EC educators, instead of being externally-generated and monitored by

legislators and policymakers who may not have the context-based knowledge and experience to make effective decisions 'at the coalface'.

- There is work to be done in educating liberal market economy communities to treat EC educators as professionals who are in the best position to know what is required to provide high quality educative care. It is necessary to generate workplace change from the bottom-up. To do so, LDC staff, services, policy-makers and researchers must consider how the profession could better recognize and incorporate the unique practical know-how, personal awareness, theoretical knowledge and emotional and physical strengths that EC educators bring to their work.
- Australian Governments and policy-makers should investigate alternative funding structures for NGOs that go beyond subsidizing the childcare fees of eligible families. There may be benefits to staff retention rates if the operational costs of LDC services are met by state or federal governments. In a broad sense, funding that directly covers the capital or running costs of a service ensures that money is spend on resources, supplies, and staffing critical to the provision of high quality educative care.

Such considerations and alterations would be a first step in minimizing the effect of specific workplace factors on EC educators' retention, providing them with the necessary support and stimulation to focus on their educative care work with young children and families. When EC educators are afforded the respect they deserve as professionals, the retention rate may well become a non-issue.

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